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ABSTRACT

It is useful to stress the similarity of the linguistic system that underlies oral and written language, but the whole language approach fails to take into account the real and significant differences that exist between oral and written language and the different purposes for which they are used. Children need explicit guidance and support in making the shift from oral to written language. A classroom exercise in which students gather and discuss a topic involving their own experiences and then are asked to write about it exemplifies the problem. The implicit assumption is that oral and written language is the same and all students have to do is write down what they said. However, the children do not see any difference in purpose for the oral and written activities. There is no sense of the purpose of writing as forming a context-free and permanent record of events. In developing effective literacy programs an extra step is required. A lesson could begin with oral discussion, then provide children with information about what a successful text, written for a particular purpose, actually looks like. Only after such information would the children attempt to write texts themselves. (RS)

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ORAL AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE IN THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Paper presented at 8th World Congress of Applied Linguistics

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The original focus of work I have done in recent years was on children's literacy development. However it has become increasingly clear to me that in order to understand literacy development it is necessary to take account of the context in which written texts are produced. This realization has resulted in a focus on the oral as well as written language that occurs within the educational context.

In my recent work I have spent much time recording the oral language interaction that occurs within the classroom, observing the class and collecting the written texts produced by children in that classroom context. This activity has convinced me of the importance of understanding the relationship between oral and written language. It has also convinced me of the importance of teachers' perceptions and assumptions about this relationship and of the fact that there are important educational implications that result from teachers' perceptions and assumptions.

I will begin this paper by referring to one of the lessons that I have recorded. The class in which this lesson was recorded consisted of 23, 7 to 8 year old children in year 3 at school. They were grouped according to ability levels for Maths and Language, and then returned to their home class for 'Process Writing'. This writing session occurred between the mid morning recess and the lunch break. At the time this particular lesson was recorded, the children had just returned to school after a two week holiday. They were gathered together at the beginning of the writing session for a brief discussion.

This lesson was typical of many other lessons in this class which began either with the teacher reading to the children, followed by a brief discussion of what had been read, or with a discussion between teacher and students about something that was happening at school, or an event of local interest.

The lesson began once the children were comfortably sitting on the floor with the teacher saying:

T : Has anybody anything they would like to say about the holidays they've just had? Something that happened to them or they did, anything at all? Just some talking time about the holidays.

The teacher then nominated children to take turns in speaking about their holidays. One of the children was Vangeli. His contribution was as follows:

T : What did you do in the holidays Vangeli? I can see you are dying to tell us..

V : I'm not dying ...

T : Well you're interested to tell us then, may be not dying.

V : On Friday, I went, I caught, me and my mother and my friend caught the train four times to get to Circular Quay. From there we took the ferry twice to get to Taronga Zoo. We went past the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge and when we got there, I couldn't see no animals or nothing in all the trees that were grown. I said Mum, this isn't going to be a very good day. And when we got there we saw all these animals. We saw one hippopotamus open his wide mouth and we took a picture of it, and my mother took a picture of me feeding these birds with a yellow beak ...

Children: (discussion of what type of bird it was. Toucan ... no not toucan ... yellow beak ...)

V : Yeah, one of those.

(more discussion about type of bird)

V : And then we went to see some reptiles, and then after that we went to see the chimpanzees, and they were so funny. One chimpanzee, a baby one, was running. He picked his nose, like he picked it and he put it in his mouth and he ate it.

Children: (Comments and giggles)

V : Then we went to feed the elephants and we took a picture of the elephants then we went to see the seals. And we saw lots of good things.

T : Have you been to the zoo before?

V : Yes.

T : Well you've been with the school haven't you?

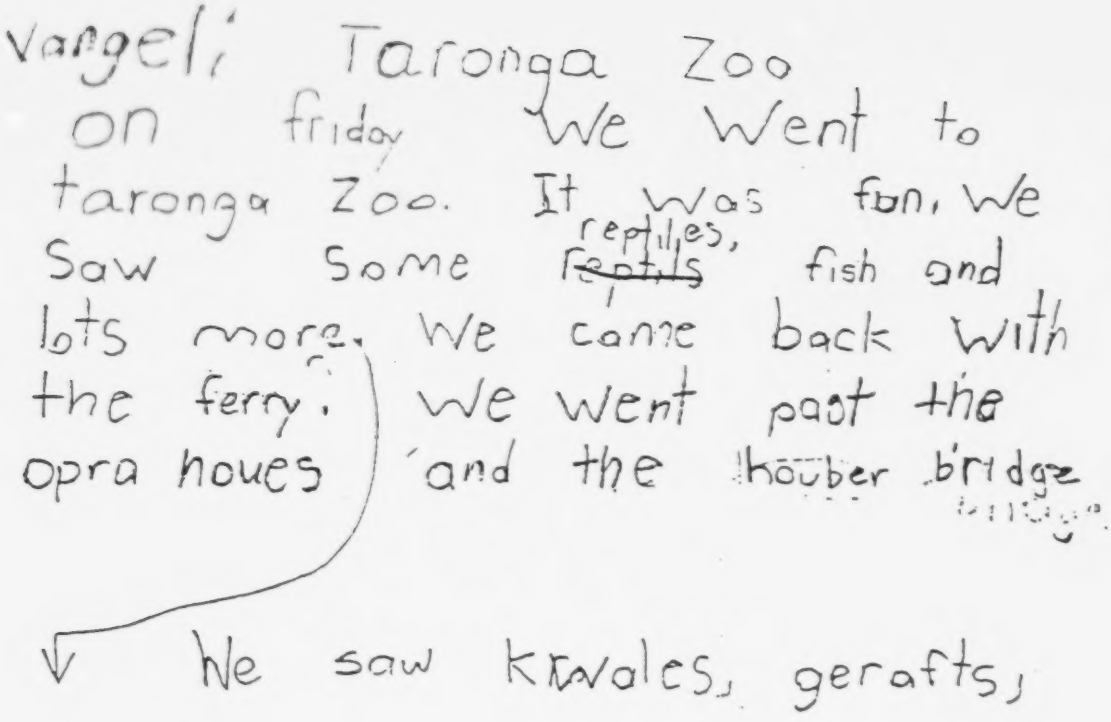
V : No.

T : Oh didn't you go with the school? I thought most of you had been in the zoo.

Children: (various comments)

T : Well that was a very interesting day for Vangeli. What about you Vasco ...

Later during the same writing session, Vangeli wrote the following text:


Vangeli Taronga Zoo
on friday We Went to
taronga Zoo. It was fun. We
Saw Some reptiles, fish and
lots more. We came back with
the ferry. we went past the
opra houes and the houber bridge
We saw kwales, gerafts,

The last sentence 'We saw kwales, gerafts' was added after a conference with the teacher who suggested that more information could be included in the text.

Even a very brief comparison reveals significant differences between Vangeli's oral and written texts. The oral text has a structure of orientation (getting to the zoo), a brief complication and resolution (not being able to see the animals through the trees and then seeing them after all). The majority of the text, however, is a recount of what the participants did and saw on their trip to the zoo. Despite a rather abrupt ending, it is a well structured and clear oral recount of Vangeli's trip to the zoo.

The oral text is quite long (twenty seven clauses) and gramatically quite intricate. All but two of these clauses form part of larger clause complexes. For example:

i We went past the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge
and when we got there
I couldn't see no animals or nothing
in all the trees that were grown.

ii And then we went to see some reptiles
and then after that we went to see some chimpanzees
and they were so funny.

Cohesion within the spoken text is reflected through use of a variety of conjunctions such as 'from there', 'and when', 'then when', 'and then'. Reference is used appropriately. The participants in the trip to the zoo are explicitly introduced 'me my mother and my friend' and referred to thereafter as 'we'. Textual development is reflected in a variety of related themes such as:

On Friday me my mother and my friend
From there we
I
one chimpanzee
We etc

Overall the spoken text is a well developed, cohesive and interesting recount.

The written text is much less successful. Its structure is reasonably clear in that it contains a brief orientation. (On Friday we went to Taronga Zoo), then a few details of what happened and what was seen. However it is very short (six clauses). It contains no clause complexes and hence no conjunctions. Each sentence consists of one clause: e.g.

On Friday we went to Taronga Zoo
We saw reptiles fish and lots more

Development of the text, such that there is, occurs largely through repetition of theme. 'We' is theme in four of the

six clauses. Participants in the trip to the zoo are not explicitly introduced but are simply referred to as 'we'.

The picture that emerges from this brief comparison is that the spoken text is well developed, rich in detail and comment and interesting to listen to, while the written text is underdeveloped, provides little information about what happened on the trip to the zoo and is not particularly interesting to read.

Why is this so? Why was Vangeli able (or why he chose) to give a rich oral recount, but only a very brief and basic written recount of the same event. There are a number of possible answers to this question. One answer is that young children (year 3) have a greater command of oral than written language. They have, after all, been learning oral language for a longer period of time. Even though Vangeli is from a non English speaking background, his oral English has developed to a considerable level of fluency. He is an articulate and confident speaker. While he is also one of the more competent writers in his class, his control of oral language is clearly ahead of his control of written language. This situation is typical of the language development of other children in the class.

Another factor which contributes to differences between young children's oral and written texts is the physical effort involved in writing. It would have taken Vangeli a long time to write a text of the same length as his oral text. However, earlier in the year after a trip to Greece and Italy, Vangeli wrote a recount which extended over some

seventeen pages, and which was divided into several chapters. Clearly when he perceived an appropriate purpose for writing, Vangeli was not deterred by the physical effort of writing long texts.

While much of the development of this long text occurred through repetition of 'and then we did x', it was considerably better developed and more interesting than the one about his visit to Taronga Zoo. Thus while differences in command of oral and written language, and the physical effort involved in writing probably contributed, it appears there must be a further explanation for the differences in quality between Vangeli's oral and written texts, and in particular for the rather poor quality of his written text.

I believe that at least part of the explanation for these differences lies in what happened in this particular lesson. The child's perceptions and the teacher's perceptions of the purpose of the lesson as a whole, and the purpose of writing within the context of this lesson, appear to be quite different. As I have suggested before, this lesson is typical of many that occurred in this classroom. It is also typical of many that occur in other classrooms and other schools, and hence an understanding of what was going on here has implications beyond this single lesson.

The child appears to regard the oral recount as the most important part of this lesson. He participates enthusiastically and very effectively in the oral recount,

but then having done so, appears to find little purpose in writing about the same event. Some of the features of his written text support this hypothesis. For example in his spoken text he explicitly introduces the participants in the recount (me, my mother and my friend), whereas throughout the written text, he simply uses 'we' to refer to the participants. He appears to assume that having already made explicit who 'we' refers to in his oral recount, the reader of his text will already have that information, and it does not need to be repeated. He includes few details of the trip to the zoo, and apart from 'It was fun', he includes no comment on the events. This is in contrast to his oral text, which is rich in details of the trip to the zoo, and the animals he saw there. The oral text also includes a number of comments on the events, for example:

> I said Mum this isn't going to be a very good day
> ... and they were so friendly
> We saw lots of good things

Overall the impression that Vangeli gives in his written text is that producing a written recount of an event immediately following an oral recount is not an adequate purpose for writing, except perhaps to satisfy the demands of the teacher.

On the other hand, the teacher clearly perceived that this was a writing lesson and that the class discussion of the children's holidays was a suitable and useful way of motivating the children to write. After each child had a turn of recounting his or her holiday experiences, the

teacher encouraged the children to write about their holiday experiences by saying:

> T : Now it's time to do some writing ... I thought some of you might do some writing about the holidays, whatever you did. It's just an idea. You don't have to, you know that. You can write about anything you like. Remember though, some of you still have not reached the right number of published stories, so I think you'd better start working and writing solidly. That means heads down and working. Try and make yourselves work.

Of the twenty three children in the class, eight wrote about their holidays. Except for two other children who worked on texts already in progress, these eight were the most competent writers in the class. That is, it appeared that the most capable children had responded to the teacher's implicit directive, and had written about their holidays. Vangeli was one of these children.

The point is that the lesson was deliberately planned and organized. It had the clear purpose of using oral discussions as a means of motivating the children to write. Further, the lesson was based on beliefs and assumptions about language which I believe are held by many teachers and teacher educators. These are:

i that the teacher should use what the child knows in order to develop effective teaching programs. This includes the 'language experience' notion of using the child's own experiences and oral language as a starting point in teaching writing;

ii that writing is essentially speech written down. This assumes that discussion of personal experiences is a necessary and sufficient preparation for writing. It also assumes that there are no significant differences in purpose or linguistic realization, between an oral text and a written text except for the phonology/graphology distinction.

I believe the first assumption is an explicit one. If questioned about the purpose of the lesson, the teacher would respond that the lesson was deliberately planned with the purpose of using the children's personal experiences and oral language as a basis for writing. However, I believe that the second assumption is largely implicit. If questioned about this assumption many teachers would concede that there may be differences between purposes and linguistic realization of oral and written texts, yet clearly the message that children receive from lessons, such as the one I have described in this paper, is that written language is speech written down.

Before discussing these assumptions in more detail, I will digress to discuss the relationship between oral and written language, and in particular some of the differences between oral and written modes that have implications for the educational context.

The Relationship Between Oral and Written Language

In any literate society oral and written language modes have evolved to fulfil different purposes and functions. Because of this, generally they are used in different contexts. The oral mode is typically used in situations where participants are face to face, as in conversations, service encounters, recounts of personal experiences or, importantly for the educational context, in formal and informal learning situations. In such contexts there is a joint negotiation of meaning as the various participants offer input, feedback, request clarification and so on.

Because participants in such language interaction are physically in the same environment and are often known to each other, they can assume shared knowledge, either on the basis of previous experiences or from the shared context in which the language interaction occurs.

Written language however is used in situations where some kind of permanent record of facts, information or ideas is required. A written text enables readers to reflect on and refer back to the same text as frequently as they require. There is a time and geographical distance between writer and reader, as the reader is not present in a shared context with the writer. Because of this physical distance writing is essentially a monologue. The writer cannot assume shared knowledge with a reader, except perhaps when writing to a close friend and even here the writer must make explicit who or what is being referred to, the sequences of events etc., as the reader is not present to request clarification should any confusion arise. More frequently writer and reader are unknown to each other. All written texts must contain details of setting, participants, sequence of events, thesis, line of argument etc. in order to be comprehensible to the reader. A written text must create its own context for meaning. It must be independent of any context outside itself. In this sense it must be decontextualized. An oral text, on the other hand, can depend on the context of the language interaction for at least part of its meaning.

Because oral and written language are generally used

for different purposes and in different contexts it is not surprising that they differ in their linguistic realizations. To demonstrate this point I will refer to three short texts that appear in M.A.K. Halliday's book Spoken and Written Language (Halliday, 1985:79).

i /// The use of this method of control unquestionably leads to safer and faster train running in the most adverse weather conditions

ii /// If this method of control is used// trains will unquestionably (be able to) run more safely and faster// (even) when the weather conditions are most adverse///

iii /// You can control the trains this way// and if you do that// you can be quite sure// that they'll be able to run more safely and more quickly// {than they would otherwise}// no matter how bad the weather gets.///

The following symbols have been used on the above texts:

/// : to indicate clause complex boundaries
// : to indicate clause boundaries
{ } : to indicate embedded clause
____ : to indicate lexical items

While the information conveyed in the above three texts remains similar, there are significant differences between them. English speakers would have little hesitation in agreeing that text i is typical of a written text, while text iii is typical of a spoken text. They would also agree that text ii lies between the other two in terms of its 'written' and 'spoken' features. What are the linguistic features that distinguish oral and written texts?

Grammatical intricacy is one of the distinguishing

features. Each of the above texts consists of a single clause complex, but whereas in text i this clause complex contains one clause, text ii contains three clauses and text iii contains five clauses, one of which includes an embedded clause. As the texts become more 'spoken', the number of clauses increases and the relationship between these clauses become more intricate. This feature is typical of other spoken and written texts. That is, spoken texts generally are more grammatically intricate than written ones.

On the other hand lexical density decreases as a text becomes more 'spoken'. Halliday (Halliday:1985 calculates lexical density by dividing the number of lexical items by the number of clauses in a text. If we follow this formula, then we see that text i, which has twelve lexical items distributed across one clause, has a lexical density of twelve. Text ii also has twelve lexical items, but these are distributed across three clauses, and hence the lexical density of text ii is four. Text iii has ten lexical items distributed across five clauses, and hence has a lexical density of only two. Again this is typical of other spoken and written texts. As grammatical intricacy in spoken texts increases, lexical density decreases.

It is interesting to note what happens to the lexical items that occur in text i as the texts become more 'spoken'. Many of the lexical items in text i occur as nouns. Examples of these include 'use', 'method of control', 'train running' and 'adverse weather conditions'. 'Use' in text ii

has become the verb 'is used' and in text iii it becomes 'if you do that' (i.e. use this method of control). 'Method of control' remains a noun in text ii, but in text iii it has changed into a verb 'control the trains this way'. 'Train running' in text ii has become a verb 'trains will ... run' and in text iii it appears as 'they'll (i.e. the trains) be able to run'. 'Adverse weather conditions' in text ii has become 'weather conditions are most adverse' and in text iii it is 'no matter how bad the weather gets'.

In each example, what appears in text i as a noun or a 'thing' becomes transferred into a verb or a 'happening', as the text becomes more 'spoken'. The nominalization that occurs in text i contributes to its lexical density and is typical of other written texts.

It should be pointed out that differences in grammatical intricacy, lexical density and nominalization that occur between oral and written texts are not absolute differences. In some contexts the distinctions become rather blurred. This is likely to occur for example in texts which are written to be spoken, as for radio, television, public lectures etc. Such texts will have features of both oral and written language. The differences referred to above represent clusters of tendencies along a continuum. However, generally purposes and contexts, in which oral and written language are used, are separate and their linguistic realizations reflect this separation.

The situation is somewhat analogous to a bilingual

society where different languages are used in different contexts. If separate contexts and separate purposes for use of the two languages disappear, then the society becomes monolingual. There is no need to have two languages that fulfil the same functions, and purposes. In literate societies the written mode exists because it fulfils functions and purposes that the oral mode cannot. Oral and written modes are used for different purposes and occur in different contexts.

How does this discussion of oral and written language relate to Vangeli? It seems to me that the point Vangeli was making in his oral and written texts was a directly related one. That is, writing a recount, immediately following an oral recount of the same event, is not an adequate purpose for writing, as the two texts are doing the same job. They are fulfilling precisely the same purpose, and hence the effort required to produce an effective written text is simply not worth while.

Teachers' Assumptions about Language

The discussion of oral and written language I believe is also relevant to the lesson as a whole in which Vangeli produced his texts, and to the assumptions upon which the teacher appeared to base this lesson. I argued earlier in this paper that these assumptions are ones that are commonly held by teachers and teacher educators, and therefore I believe an understanding of how they arose and their educational implications is important.

The first assumption on which the lesson was based was that the teacher should use the child's own experiences and knowledge of oral language as a basis for teaching writing. In this lesson as in many others, the child's 'own experiences' are interpreted as being personal experiences which occur outside the formal classroom setting. Inevitably writing about personal experiences means writing recounts of the kind Vangeli wrote in his 'Taronga Zoo' text.

In the early stages of literacy development there appears to be considerable merit in this assumption. At this time the oral language used by young children, and what they are attempting to write, are in fact very similar. An emphasis on 'writing down what you say' is useful in teaching young children that writing is a meaningful activity, and that language can be expressed through writing, as well as through speaking. It is also useful in teaching some of the conventions of writing such as left to right progression, word spaces, and spelling within the context of meaningful written texts.

However, as children move beyond the early stages of literacy development, their spoken and written language becomes less similar. Mode differences become more important. A continued emphasis on writing based on personal experiences does not provide an adequate basis for teaching about the different purposes for which we use writing in a literate society, either at school and in the broader community. This is not to suggest that children should never write recounts based on personal experiences,

but rather, that problems exist if these recounts are the only genres that children write.

There are further implications that arise from this assumption. If the approach being used to teach children to write does not explicitly take account of purpose and mode differences between oral and written languange, then children are not likely to be given any explicit assistance in moving beyond writing personal experience texts, and in fact this is what happened in Vangeli's class. The class writing program was based on 'Process Writing', an approach which emphasises personal responses and personal experiences as a basis for writing and discussing written texts. During the year, the children wrote virtually only personal experience genres. While it may be argued that such young children have plenty of time to learn to write a range of other genres as they get older, the interesting thing is that the previous year these same children were writing a greater range of genres, and doing so quite effectively. The difference was that during the previous year the children received explicit guidance and support in writing narratives and factual reports through oral discussions of particular topics, and then class negotiated texts, which provided models on which the children could base their own writing. Without the continued explicit guidance and support, which was provided in that previous year, the children reverted to writing easier genres which more closely resembled their familiar oral language.

The second assumption on which the lesson was based is that writing is essentially speech written down. As I suggested before, this assumption is probably implicit but nevertheless it is the message that children receive from lessons such as this one. It is also the message that is implicitly supported by much of the current literature on literacy development specifically that which refers to Process Writing and 'whole-language' teaching (e.g. Cambourne 1984, 1985; Harste *et al* 1984, Goodman 1986). Very briefly, the argument relating to mode that runs through this literature, is that listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all part of the same thing, that is they are part of the 'whole' that is language. Implications for the teaching of literacy are drawn from this argument. These implications stress the similarity of how oral and written language modes are learned, and suggest that classroom literacy learning environments ought to be based as far as possible on the 'natural' learning environment in which children learn their oral language.

It is undoubtedly true that listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all part of language. It is also useful to stress the similarity of the linguistic system that underlies oral and written language, especially as a contrast to the fragmented behaviourist approach to language teaching which dominated for many years. However I believe this argument over-simplifies the matter. It fails to take account of the real and significant mode differences that exist between

oral and written language and it fails to take account of the different purposes for which we use oral and written language in society. The implications of this argument are that children are given little explicit guidance or support in making the mode shift from oral to written language. Children need to be able to make this shift in order to cope with the literacy demands placed on them in high school and in later life. That is,the implications of failing to recognize mode differences are that children are given little assistance in learning how to write effectively for the variety of purposes for which we use writing in a literate society.

I will attempt to draw together the various points I have been making in this paper. The main point is this: There are problems in the lesson that I have discussed which, like many others,move directly from a discussion of personal experiences to writing about those personal experiences.. There are two reasons for these problems.

i The types of personal experiences on which the lesson was based do not provide an adequate basis for extending the child's knowledge of the world, nor for exploring different purposes for which we use writing in our society. I would suggest that in developing literacy programs we need to consider the kinds of experiences and oral discussions that are appropriate to use as a basis for writing. Such considerations will incorporate a language across the curriculum perspective, 29 that experiences and discussions

in subject areas such as science and social studies form the basis for learning to write for different purposes. This is not to suggest that children should never write about their personal experiences and personal responses, but to suggest that teachers need to ensure their students do not only write about their personal experiences.

ii Oral discussion is a necessary but not sufficient preparation for writing. In developing effective literacy programs it is necessary to take account of mode differences. This entails providing an extra step when teaching children to write. Thus a lesson may begin with an oral discussion of a particular topic, but instead of moving directly from this discussion to the children writing on that topic, an extra step needs to be inserted that will provide an opportunity for the children to obtain information about what a successful text, written for a particular purpose actually looks like. Only after such information has been made available do the children attempt to write texts themselves.

The extra step in the process of teaching children to write may take a range of different forms. It may be that the children get this information through their own reading, i.e. the expressive and factual literature that the children are reading may provide them with models upon which their own writing can be based. If the teacher also discusses, reflects on and analyses such literature, the children will undoubtedly learn much from such models. As well, this extra step may entail teacher and class working together to jointly negotiate a model text which the teacher writes on the board. Such an activity has the advantage

of not only providing a model, but providing a model that the children themselves have actively engaged in constructing. The extra step may occur as the teacher conferences with individual children about particular texts that they are working on. Such conferences enable teacher and pupil to clarify the purpose for writing the text, the overall structure, development and linguistic features of individual texts. Effective conferences however are dependent on there being an on-going developing awareness of language and how language works. That is, they are dependent on the development of a shared class language for talking about language which will enable children to reflect on and discuss the texts that they are writing.

The extra step may include any or all of the activities referred to above. These activities need not occur every day in every lesson, but they do need to be a regular part of any literacy program. The important point is that there is provision in literacy programs for the teaching of what successful written texts look like. Such programs need to take into account the different purposes and contexts in which we use oral and written language in our society. They also need to take account of the consequent linguistic differences between oral and written genres. If children are to successfully make the transition from their familiar oral language into the written mode then they need explicit guidance and support from a teacher who has an understanding of mode differences and of how purpose shapes both oral and written genres.

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